

The Waco Tornado of May 11, 1953

Slide Set Log

as told by Mr. Duane Jones, City Engineer

[Revised Copy]

The Waco, Texas Tornado of May 11, 1953

Photo Log

Slide No. 1

This tornado was sighted coming in from the southwest; no one could reach the weather bureau because the telephone lines were completely blocked. It came in and traversed the town from the southwest corner to the northeast corner, going right through the heart of town.

Slide No. 2

Here is the sign on the First National Bank Building showing the time of the tornado; it was twenty minutes till five. Wives were parked on the streets, waiting for their husbands to get off work; we will see the damage which came to these parked automobiles. This damage came from parapet walls with great, tremendous cut limestone caps on them. We have pictures of cars that are not even as high as their tires--even the tires were laid over. There was one man that did come out of one of those cars; he fell over it and it was bridged. It was just one of those miracles.

Slide No. 3

Here is the path of the tornado through Waco, travelling from the southwest to the northeast. This bridge crossing the Brazos River was built about the same time as the Brooklyn Bridge and had never been moved. The clamps on the cable were completely cemented to the cable, but those clamps were moved as much as a foot. They varied in distance moved from the bottom to the top of the cable.

Slide No. 4

This gives you a view of downtown Waco. This is the Album Building, which was the tallest building in town; it's a very slim structure and could have very easily overturned. It would have very little overturn moment resistance from the narrow direction. Right across the street from there was the Dentist Building which was completely destroyed. That was originally a five-story building and they had gone in and split two floors, making it a seven-story building. I looked in the basement of this building on Monday night and it was completely full of water. On Wednesday, I went in the basement after they had pumped the water out and glasses were still sitting on the shelves, and all kinds of china were still sitting on the shelves. They didn't have water in them, most of them, though. We looked into the basement and saw it completely brimming full of water. They had an eight-inch line that was open and flowing in there and it took us almost all night to get it shut off. We had to come in here, and the street was completely blocked, and that valve was right down in here, and we had to go in there and clean it [the street] off to get to the valve.

Slide No. 5

This is a picture of the Dentist Building. This is what remained of a seven-story building. The construction of this building was with sand, brick and lime mortar, timber floor joists and ceiling joists. The walls had no pilasters at all; there was no lateral support on the walls. The timbers for the floor joists and ceiling joists were merely stuck into the load-bearing brick walls, and the building came straight down. The walls went out in all directions. That's one of the big arguments we've had with the meteorologists. They said it was wind velocity that did this, but the examples I saw, I claimed it was a difference in atmospheric pressure. We have testimony, and I testified in Federal Court for four hours; however, other testimony was given in that federal case that the single strength glass windows had more strength than the walls of the building.

Slide No. 6

This is a storage building. There was a pool parlor back in here--it was on the second floor. There were some boys that were saved there who had jumped underneath the pool table. This valve I was talking about [slide 4] was located right in here. You can see what kind of difficulty I had. In a case like this, you cannot use heavy equipment if there is a chance of people being alive in there. So everything had to be moved by hand. We did have one body that was trapped between large timbers by a leg and an arm. The doctor that amputated the arm and leg to get the body out required that we have the family come down and identify the body. I was off working someplace else when they brought the family down there, but the women fainting on the street and screaming . . . I went to the Medical Association and asked them if that had to happen, according to their rules of ethics. They said no. I said, well we'll have a new doctor next time. I'm not going to have people fainting and screaming in the street and having to view something like this.

Slide No. 7

This is a look at the front side fo the Dentist Building; we're working at night here. They did have a little bit of heavy equipment in here, just getting that off the streets, but when you got into the building, you couldn't use even a Grado, and a Grado was porbably some of the best equipment. It would come in there and hug the timbers and get some rubble with it. Some people were rescued alive in this building; of course, the greatest number died in this building. There were 114 people killed and \$50 million worth of damage; at that date that was much damage to the city of Waco.

Slide No. 8

This is Chris's Cafe, which was adjacent to the Dentist Building; you can see how it exploded.

Slide No. 9

[I can't] identify the exact building here; the reason for this [slide is so that] you can see this car [which] isn't badly damaged--not crushed, like some.

Slide No. 10

This is a street scene. I believe that this is Washington [Street]; you can see the cars that are buried here. There were many cases where women waiting for their husbands to get off work had parked on the side of the street. One woman was parked and her children went in to get birdseed for their parakeet and she sat there and saw both of them killed--crushed them. That was on the street back of the Dentist Building.

Slide No. 11

This was a warehouse type structure; you can see the entire face of the building is lying out in the street or on top of the trucks there. It has been just completely demolished--it exploded. It went out in all directions.

Slide No. 12

Number 12 is another street scene in the vicinity of the Dentist Building. Again, you can see the automobiles that have been crushed.

Slide No. 13

This is a new brick building; you can see what it [the tornado] did to the upper floor--just blasted the face of it off.

Slide No. 14

This is an example that the Portland Cement Association would rather not talk about. This was a concrete stage at the fairgrounds--you can see the reinforcing steel--but this was an old stage that was closed in and made a bathhouse for the swimming pool. Right here is the ticket house; it was on skids. Two boys ran from this ticket office over into this bathhouse of reinforced concrete; both of them were killed. Now that ticket office was not moved an inch; wasn't touched. But it completely destroyed that reinforced concrete bathhouse. I think originally it was just columns that supported the stage, and then they came in and they probably blocked it in with concrete blocks or something like that. I didn't go back there and inspect the material. But they had hunks of this concrete thrown into the swimming pool large enough that it knocked a good part of the bottom of it out. That swimming pool bottom had to practically be rebuilt.

Slide No. 15

This is that same stage where they were digging those boys out. One of the boys was a sergeant on the police force; I think that's probably his father standing there.

Slide No. 16

This is an automobile that was parked on the street in front of one of the buildings; you can see the condition of that automobile.

Slide No. 17

Seventeen is the area around City Hall in Waco. All these buildings were of 1880-1890 vintage. Many of them had basements in them, but they just crashed right on through the floor to the basement. There was one black man down there that was trapped and they kept digging to get him out; he wasn't praying to the Lord, he was talking to the Lord. He said, "Lord, Lord, I'll never take another drink of beer if you let me out of here." He said, "I'll never go in a beer joint again." He just kept that up the whole time. The blacks were helping dig out and bring the bodies that were found over in this area and helping lay them on the City Hall lawn area. They were doing just fine until somebody took a white sheet and covered one of those bodies and we lost all of our labor with that one move.

Slide No. 18

This is the First Methodist Church, and this is the steeple--the tower right here that came off. Now, there hasn't been as much damage in here; damage fell right around here. I imagine the damage here was from this going on. There wasn't as much structure failure.

Slide No. 19

Again, this shows the area around City Hall, the square. To the southeast you can see the military trucks; we had about 5000 troops in there to help. General Desusway(?) said he didn't want to put it [Waco] under martial law; he and the Mayor agreed not to do so. When General Desusway first came in I started having trouble between the civilians and the military and so I had to separate them. I accepted some equipment operators, because at first we didn't have many equipment operators. But the military and civilians just didn't work together in great unison.

Slide No. 20

This is a fairly modern building' it was the Montgomery Ward building and it was owned by the Baptist Church. But again, you can see windows knocked out here, and the row of parapets is completely gone. It hit the awning, which was natural to go, there wasn't anything to keep it from going.

Slide No. 21

This is a little store that was between two buildings; you can see where the roof was connected. It [the tornado] completely destroyed that little store. That's all that's left of it.

Slide No. 22

Here is another fairly modern building; I believe this is the Higgin Building. Again I think we can attribute this [failure] to lateral support--I just don't think they had any. There wasn't a lot of thought given to pilasters in this older construction.

Slide No. 23

[This is] just in front of some old buildings; I believe they're along [deleted] Street. You can see that the front of the building has been completely demolished.

Slide No. 24

Another building where the awning or the canopy has been completely destroyed by the second floor of the building coming down on it, as well as the parapet wall.

Slide No. 25

This is a railroad station. Again, this wasn't too old a structure, but it was destroyed.

Slide No. 26

This is a view of buildings along Franklin Street; you can see that the major destruction has been in the upper floor of these old buildings. I would not allow any gas to be turned on in any of these buildings, which had the upper floor destroyed. The Mayor backed me up on it because the City Engineer has to give permission for the gas to be turned on once it has been turned off. We turned off the whole town, and we never did have a fire in cleaning up for this tornado.

Slide No. 27

This is another picture of the fronts of the buildings, showing the way they were just completely destroyed.

Slide No. 28

This is just a wrinkled tin shack. It's weathered a little bit, but how something like that stayed there is a little hard to understand.

Slide No. 29

This is the Roosevelt Hotel; notice the number of windows that were destroyed or knocked out in that building.

Slide No. 30

This Armour and Company sign is on a fairly modern building; at least it has clay brick and probably cement mortar.

Slide No. 31

This was a workshop. You can see that the workshop stood up, but the building on the outside [of the workshop] was completely destroyed.

Slide No. 32

This is a picture of the Montgomery Ward building I referred to before.

Slide No. 33

This is a public school building; one end of it was pretty well destroyed, and the other end was left pretty well intact.

Slide No. 34

This is Montgomery Ward's again; you can see that there used to be a store here in between, but they cleaned it out on about Tuesday, immediately after it [the tornado] happened on Monday. The engineers and contractors in Waco got together, a team of three. I'd worked up a check-off list and they went around and inspected every building that was damaged in Waco and completed these check-off sheets as to the status of the building. I used those condition reports to determine whether to turn the gas on or not. Well, the council got excited about being sued, and we still had fifty buildings that had a considerable amount of debris in them. General Desusway said that he would keep the Army in there as long as there was enough debris inside the buildings to cover a body. And that didn't take much debris.

Slide No. 35

This is another view of store fronts.

Slide No. 36

This is a more modern building; it looks like pretty good brick and mortar. All of the show windows are out.

Slide No. 37

Another building and a car that was not completely caught in it [the tornado].

Slide No. 38

This shows buildings that are destroyed; others that are standing. Those standing have the windows knocked out. All of them proved to be stronger than the single strength glass.

Slide No. 39

We had gotten the streets pretty well cleaned up. You'll have to remember that only two streets went in and out of downtown Waco, and it took some time to get the debris out of the streets.

Slide No. 40

This is a view just across an area; I don't know what was there.

Slide No. 41

Here is another building that was destroyed; the upper floor and the wall were destroyed, and you can see this wasn't just a thin brick wall; it was a fairly thick brick wall.

Slide No. 42

This is the Montgomery Ward building again; see where it shows a window area completely demolished. But the upper part stood here; again, you probably have some lateral support built into the wall.

Slide No. 43

This is just a little of the steeple they salvaged.

Slide No. 44

This is another building that is completely wrecked; this was a very weak building to start with.

Slide No. 45

This slide shows destruction on the first floor; not as much on the second floor. All the window panes were knocked out on the second floor of the center building.

Slide No. 46

This is the Montgomery Ward building.

Slide No. 47

These are some old, old buildings of about 1885 vintage.

Slide No. 48

This is a frame church that failed, or fractured badly on the corner. As far as the timber structure, however, it stood up pretty well.

Slide No. 49

Here's another wooden house that stood up.

Slide No. 50

This is a well constructed building with reinforcement: parapets built into the walls.

Slide No. 51

This is one of the older buildings in Waco, but this is a very, very strong building. This building received very little damage, but look at the strength in that building, and look at the tie-across. That building is tied everywhere you could think of. [And it is built with] masonry, block masonry. And that building goes back into the 1890's.